MOON.anecdote

———Chapter 1

A red moon hung in the air.

This was a square room, concrete on all sides and windowless. Looking up, there was nothing but a dreary incandescent bulb, providing the bare minimum of light a person needed to live.

However, there was undeniably a ‘Moon’ here. And it watched everything, from beginning to end.

The mother’s hands stretch out around her daughter’s neck. Her daughter’s expression is replaced by astonishment, and a dull noise echoes through the room at the same time.

The ash colored room turns a muddled red.

With a tumble the mother collapses, still trying to cling to her daughter. Her daughter’s simple outfit is now vivid, as if it had been doused with paint.

It was at that moment that the mother’s mouth formed its final words, but the daughter was unable to hear them. A different ‘Voice’ had wedged itself into her consciousness. There was no doubt it had been a ‘Voice.’ And yet, there was no one in this room other than the mother and daughter.

Nevertheless, the ‘Moon’ just continued to watch.

“Congratulations, Kanuma Youko.”

The ‘Voice’ spoke the daughter’s name.

It was a name no one had called her since she arrived at the facility. A name that even her own mother didn’t call her. A name she had longed to hear.

At the daughter’s feet, the red fluid still continued to pour out from her mother’s head. She wasn’t moving anymore.

There was a small clock beside her. It was something that the daughter had prepared as a present for her mother. The daughter had been holding it until only just a moment ago. She wanted nothing except to see her mother’s happy face, so she spent hours choosing this birthday present.

Web-like cracks spread across the face of the clock, and the second hand was jittering irregularly. There was blood seeping into broken plastic, staining it red. The clock had been completely broken.

The words from the ‘Voice’ continued.

Kanuma Youko stared at the ‘Moon.’ At the ‘Red Moon,’ and nothing else. Staring, staring…

———Chapter 2

When she awoke, Kanuma Youko took a deep breath. The same dream as usual. And, once she realized it was still the time that people called the middle of the night, she sighed again.

The motif of this room was white. It had windows, and of course, curtains as well. She had gotten the furniture she needed, piece by piece, and although the room was small, both in terms of function and design, it wasn’t a bad place for one person to live.

Unfortunately, nothing here had been picked out according to Youko’s tastes, which made her feel slightly discontent, but she understood better than anyone how lacking she was when it came to such things, so she didn’t complain.

This was the outside world.

It was different from how it was inside the facility, where there weren’t windows or anything else. Where the only way to note the passage of time was from the growth of your hair.

The ‘Red Moon’ no longer exists.

On that day, this one girl had been freed from her frozen time.

However…

Feeling a dull pain in her left hand, she looks down without thinking. The hand that she usually wears a glove over. Now, with nothing in the way, she can still clearly read the red brand imprinted into the back of it.

‘A-9’

That had been her name once. A number used to identify her. That mark, which she would likely carry for the rest of her life, still ate away at Youko’s heart.

Tightly gripping the sheets, her hand remembers that moment.

The sensation from that time.

The weight of the clock.

Losing control of herself, and swinging her arms.

A solid impact.

Hitting against something, and the feeling of both hands going numb.

And finally, the sound of something cracking open like an egg, and the sight of her mother falling. A warm liquid, flowing across her left hand as if to cover up the brand.

When her mother fell, still attempting to cling to her daughter, her face was right next to Youko's.

Too close to see her mother's expression.

However, Youko was certain that her mother had whispered something. But the weak and delicate words had been drowned out by other, stronger ones.

The 'Moon' had been there.

Bright red, as if it had just absorbed her mother's blood. From that moment on, the words of the 'Moon' were all that mattered to Youko. There was no need to think. About right now, about tomorrow, or about the day after tomorrow. Everything was locked away inside that concrete square.

Including her mother's last words.

Even now, freed from that room, she couldn't remember what her mother said. The words must have reached her ears. Youko wanted to know what they were. Even if they were words of resentment aimed at a daughter who couldn't respond to her mother's wishes…

The 'Red Moon' no longer exists.

However, there was something beyond the half drawn curtains. Even now, a full moon hung in the sky, separated by a single pane of glass. It looked to Youko like it had been stained in her mother's blood.

———Chapter 3

“Haruka, do you like pickles?”

The second floor seating area of the hamburger shop was crowded with students stopping in on their way home from school. Two uniformed girls sat facing each other by the window. There was nothing particularly unusual about this scene, with the only thing worth mentioning being that the uniforms of the girls belonged to different schools.

“What?”

Leaving the french fry she inserted into her mouth where it was, the one named Haruka frowned. Her nonplussed reaction was directed at a girl wearing a large ribbon on her head, who had removed her hamburger from its wrapper and was swiftly disassembling the contents.

“Yui, what the heck are you doing?”

“Can’t you tell by looking?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Perhaps she was used to the ribbon headed girl’s—Yui’s—inscrutable behavior, but Haruka quickly lost interest, bringing another fry to her mouth.

“Honestly speaking, I hate them!”

“Why don’t you just order something else then…”

“I like hamburgers.” Ignoring Haruka’s blank expression, she began to clear away the offending pickles. Her hand paused for a second.

Haruka smacked her in the head.

“Ow! What did you do that for, Haruka!?”

“That’s my line.”

"I'm just sharing some of my extra toppings with you."

"You think pickles and pancakes go together?"

"Yep."

"Don't 'yep' me!" Huffing in exasperation, she scrutinized the face of the girl one year younger than her. Yui was smiling to herself, as usual, without a care in the world.

It had been the same way the first time Haruka met Yui. The girl had been smiling inside that place, so incongruous with her environment. However…

"Come on, eat your pickles yourself."

"Don't wanna. They're bitter and sour."

"That's the reason you're small, because you're picky."

"Heey, don't call me small! And eating pickles won't help you grow!"

"It will. Even Mino Monta said so."

"Is that really true?"

"I wouldn't lie to you."

That was a lie, though. Thinking that last part, she rested on her chin and watched Yui squirm. Still looking doubtful, Yui took the smallest pickle and put it into her mouth. It took her a long time to chew, but eventually she spoke.

"...It tastes bad." Sulking, she gave Haruka an accusatory stare.

"I never said anything about it tasting good."

"That's true, but I still feel like I've been tricked somehow."

"Hey, Yui." It occurred to Haruka that she'd prefer to see her with a smile.

"What?"

Furthermore, Haruka knew that within this tiny girl was the strength to always keep smiling, no matter the situation.

"Wouldn't you like another pickle?"

"Haruka, how is it that you can say something like that and look so happy?"

"Because it's fun."

"I knew it, you're teasing me."

"I'm grateful to you, you know."

"What part of this is gratitude? Aren't you the one who's always quick to hit me?"

"I'm serious."

"Haruka, you liar! Even someone like me won't fall for that again!"

She was grateful to Yui.

Because of Yui's smile. Because of that, I was able to make it.

"I'm serious." Really serious…

"Haruka, I hate you!"

"In that case, I hate you too."

"Uuu…"

Yui waved her left hand in the air like a frantic child. And, as if she was soothing a child, Haruka gently placed her left hand on Yui's head. They had hidden the brands on the back of their hands. On that day, those red marks had been scarred into their flesh at the same time. Haruka was reminded of that place whenever she saw hers.

The facility.

As well as the day she escaped…

———Chapter 4

The commotion had moved into the distance. Something terrible was happening inside the facility. That was all she knew.

Haruka was running.

The outside of the facility was completely foreign to her. It was somewhere like a mountain road. The sun had set, and there were no lights to guide her.

Mima Haruka ran, carrying her tattered clothes and an even more tattered heart. The only thing illuminating the path was the full moon floating in the darkness. Without ever turning back, she single-mindedly pushed herself forward. Her body had long reached its limits, and it was almost like she was trying to escape from the full moon visible behind her. She was determined to keep running until she lost consciousness.

Once that happened, she'd be fine if she never woke up again.

Waking up would only mean nothing but painful memories. Haruka didn't have the confidence that she could keep sustaining her despairing heart, tomorrow and the next day and every day that came after that.

"...Haruka?"

She heard a voice calling her, just as she was about to allow her thoughts to dim.

"Yu…i?"

"That's right. It's Nakura Yui—hang on, Haruka, you're a mess!"

"So are you…"

"I'm nowhere as bad as I look. I feel surprisingly good."

"...Right."

Haruka collapsed with a thud. Her skin had been pierced by the exposed terrain, and there were cuts and abrasions on various parts of her body. The pain was just enough to keep her conscious. That, together with…

“Haruka! Harukaaa!!!”

The small girl’s desperate voice roused Haruka’s nearly shattered heart.

“...Please don’t shout right into my ear.”

“Haruka! Thank goodness, I was afraid you wouldn’t answer.”

“I’m glad you’re okay, Yui.”

“Fit as a fiddle!”

With that said, the smile on Yui’s face wasn’t enough to hide her own exhaustion.

“...What do you mean, you’re caked in mud…”

“Oh. That’s from…” As if she was just remembering, she looked down at her muddy self and then turned her gaze elsewhere. Towards a place a little farther away from the mountain road. There was a mound of dirt there, almost tall enough to be considered a small mountain in its own right. A large tree branch had been stuck into the very top of it.

“...Yui, did you make that?”

“That’s right. I worked real hard on it.”

“I can tell that much but…what is it?”

“A grave for Choco.”

“Choco?”

“That was the dog’s name. He’s dead though.”

“Recently?”

“No. A long, long time ago. When I was much smaller. Even smaller than I am now.”

“Then, why…?”

“I didn’t make him a grave. Because I was selfish…”

Yui’s expression floated in the darkness, lit by the full moon. She stood there, looking like she was about to cry as she smiled, but it also seemed that she had moved on from something.

“I was stupid, so I thought that Choco would come back to life. I thought that even if he died, my sister would be able to do something about it.”

“...”

“But there’s no such thing as coming back to life.”

“...That’s right. Once you die, that’s the end.”

That was why Haruka couldn’t bear carrying her sadness with her, today and tomorrow. She didn’t think she could bear it.

“So that’s why I’ve decided. I’m going to smile a little more today than I did yesterday. And tomorrow, I’ll smile a little more than I did today. If I do that, then someday I’ll be able to smile just as much as I did a long time ago, right?”

“...”

“...Um, you don’t think so?”

“You’re too simple.”

“...uuu.”

“On top of that, you’re an idiot.”

“T-there’s no need to go that far!”

"And while I'm at it, you're flat."

"That has nothing to do with this!!!"

"But…"

You're so much stronger than I am.

"But what?"

"It's nothing."

"I'm curious, though?"

"Don't worry about it."

But…

If I'm with her, it might be possible.

Little by little, bit by bit.

Tomorrow, more than today. The day after that, more than tomorrow. The day may come that I'm able to smile from the bottom of my heart.

———Chapter 5

When she woke for the second time, Kanuma Youko had reached a singular decision. She had to find the answer.

Dreams are the vestiges of memory. However, she needed to dig beyond her dreams, to find the memories deeper inside. There was only one way she could think to do that.

After changing her clothes, she fixed her hair, which was shorter than it used to be but still long, and then went outside. She passed through the usual park. Maybe it was because it was still too early, but it was empty. Spending time in this park had

become part of Youko's daily routine. Youko's, as well as one other person's. She would always appear after Youko had taken a seat on the bench. Youko would open the book she was reading, and without fail, "Can I sit here?"

A girl's voice.

"Go ahead."

Lightly averting her eyes, she gives an awkward nod.

"Youko, have you eaten breakfast yet?"

"Not yet."

"In that case, let's eat these together. I bought enough for you as well."

"Anpan?"

"Mmhmm. The ones they have here are really good. Oh, I have drinks as well." Opening the paper bag, the girl spreads out the red bean buns, still sealed in plastic, and a selection of canned coffees across the bench. "Help yourself."

"...Okay."

It was an everyday scene. The two of them sitting side by side, eating. The first time she met this girl had been the same way, certainly…

"Is it good?"

"...I don't know." Youko shakes her head. "I haven't eaten very many of these."

"Now that you mention it, they never once had things like anpan or hamburgers on the menu there, did they?"

"They didn't."

"It was strangely elaborate. The taste wasn't all that bad either."

"...I don't know."

“That’s right…Youko, you were there a long time. Of course you would have gotten bored of it.”

“In the past…”

“Hm?”

Youko picks up a small can of coffee.

“This part comes off, right?” She slowly rubs the mouth of the can with a gloved hand.

“Now that you mention it…”

“I wonder when that changed…”

Idle chatter.

That was the purpose of this meeting.

Even her book remained open to the same page. As a result, the book she brought was always the same one.

In the beginning she was bewildered by passing the time like this, but now it felt more important to her than anything else.

However, that was exactly why…

“What do you think about today’s choice? It came highly recommended, you know.”

“...I get the feeling it might taste good.”

“I’m glad.” Saying that, the girl smiles.

“You know about a lot of shops, Ikumi.”

“Yeah. Yui tells me about them.”

That was exactly why…

She needed to be sure of what her mother said back then.

No matter how much it might end up hurting her.

———Chapter 6

She had no idea how many hours she'd walked.

Youko walked alone, along the crude mountain road which barely qualified as such. The sun was passing overhead, and it was only a matter of time before it disappeared over the mountain.

She wanted to get to her destination before that happened.

To that place.

To that facility, where she thought she'd never go again.

Eventually it appeared in front of her, along with the gloom inside her heart. A square building, no windows, covered in concrete. The shutter door she'd sometimes see had been locked in a half-open position.

There was no sign of anyone in the building. Youko stepped inside without hesitation. It was even darker inside. The slight amount of illumination in the building had completely stopped working, and there was only the occasional flash from the emergency lights to help her. A rancid odor filled the narrow halls. Placing her hand along the wall in order to find the way, she could feel deep cracks in it.

The only thing she heard were her own footsteps.

There was no indication of any other life here.

On that day, the 'Moon' had been destroyed. That was the day that Youko's frozen time began to flow once more. The facility had completely ceased to function.

Life went on, and Youko had no idea what ended up becoming of this place. However, right now she needed it.

-Minmes-

That was the name of this room. Back then, entering Minmes everyday was such a normal part of her routine that she never even questioned it. A research subject, all done in the name of training. That had been Youko’s position in this room, and in this organization. If she entered Minmes one more time, if she stepped into that machine, she might be able to find her answer.

She might be able to hear her mother’s last words.

Placing everything in that faint glimmer of hope, Youko finds herself standing in front of Minmes once again. Responding to her will, the machine comes to life.

A slight vibration. The machine, shaped like a magic circle, emits a pale light.

“It’s faint…”

Normally the room would have been saturated with the blue light, but the machine had clearly weakened. Even so, Youko walks into the center of the floating ring.

It feels like her mind is suddenly transported to another space. It was an experience she has gone through hundreds and hundreds of times, and she entrusts herself to it without batting an eyebrow.

Her mother is standing there.

She’s walking toward her, a forced smile on her lips.

Youko feels something hard in her right hand.

The present she chose, thinking it would please her mother.

The wiry fingers close around her neck.

The sensation of her throat being constricted.

This is a reenactment of that event.

Youko moves her arm haphazardly, attempting to break free from the pain.

At the time, she had no idea what was happening.

However, it hurt, and she wanted to get away, so she swung her arm.

She swung her hand, which was still tightly gripping the present for her mother.

The sound of a dull thud, together with the strength leaving her mother's arms.

She collapses, falling forward onto Youko.

Her hands wrap around her daughter's body.

Almost as if she was…

"Ah…"

Her fallen mother passes through her. Her body fades away, along with the rest of the scene, like it was all made from mist. The next thing Youko knew, she was back in the original room. The light had gone out of the magic circle, and everything was silent. Minmes had stopped working.

"I'm sorry...Youko."

Those words rang out abruptly in the stillness.

It was not her mother's voice.

It was younger, a girl’s voice. One that she knew well.

“Ikumi?”

“I think that’s what your mother wanted to tell you.”

Amasawa Ikumi stood in the darkness.

“What are you doing here?”

“I knew what you were thinking, somehow. Ever since that time, I suppose.”

“That’s…”

Groping around in the darkness, she finds Ikumi there. Standing where her mother had been just a moment ago.

“That’s…an invasion of privacy.”

“Youko, please don’t say tha—ah.”

Youko reaches out to hold Ikumi.

Ikumi embraces her back.

This was what neither one could do back then.

The daughter, nor the mother.

When it came to her mother’s last words, the ones she didn’t get to hear, those too had probably been…

“How strange…you really do feel just like my mother.”

“I might not look it, but I am one, you know.”

“Yes, you are.”

There was nothing left inside the facility. However, beyond the concrete, in the night sky, a brilliant full moon floated above them. Peacefully, in the darkness.